

“Long Live the King”

- Like most people my age, I grew up on a steady diet of Saturday morning cartoons, Nick at Night, and Star Trek on Saturday evenings (that’s typical, right?)
 - And of course Disney movies...Of fairytales and castles
 - My parents even took my brother and me to Disney World once
 - There was just something about it all- the kings, queens, princesses and princes, the the heroes and heroins defeating the villains
 - That could capture the imagination of a kid like not much else could
 - I also remember reading about King Arthur and the Court at Camelot, and his knights of the round table
 - Hearing about King David, Saul, and Solomon in church
 - And especially about Rome, its founding mythical brothers Romulus and Remus¹... (it all really does come back to Star Trek in the end)
 - I was fascinated with Roman history: with the famous emperor named Gaius Julius Caesar, and the rise of the Roman Empire
 - And about 50 years later two governors named Herod and Pilate
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 - While all of this fascinated me and engaged my imagination, the idea of a Kingdom ruled by a king is certainly a foreign one to me, and us
 - A form of government centered on one person, where their will and wishes as good as law
 - Where the whole kingdom reflects that one persons values and personality
 - Where justice and freedom and liberty only exist if allowed by the ruling party
 - Our country and government of course founded to get away from such a arbitrary system of ruling,
 - Setting up a Democracy and separate branches of government to prevent such a tyrannical rule

¹ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/rome-founded>

- You may debate later- perhaps light coffee hour conversation- how successful our country has been at this over the centuries
- Perhaps it might be a little hard for us today to get a good grasp on this liturgical holiday that we celebrate today
- And what it means to be a member of a Kingdom- even one from God
- Today is Christ the King Sunday... Long live the King.
- It is the final Sunday in the liturgical year
- Or one also might think of it as The Reign of Christ Sunday, or Empire of Christ Sunday²
- Today is the closing act, the grand finale, it is what we have been working toward and praying for all year long
- Next week we start the whole thing again with Advent 1 and we begin the cycle and the story all over again
- It is a relatively new liturgical holiday added to the calendar only in 1925 by Pope Pius XI³
- The time was after WWI had ended, and while the world was no longer actively fighting
- But there was no unity either.
- The Pope believed that there could only be lasting peace if we put aside our divisions driven by fascism and excessive nationalism
 - And united under the banner of the Prince of Peace
- 100 years later, and the truth of the Pope's statements still echo as truth
- While this was a very recent announcement by a 20th century Pope, the understanding of a Kingdom where Christ is King goes back much further
- The Pope was looking back at the writings of Eusebius in 314 AD for inspiration, but it goes back all the way to Jesus himself.
- In our Gospel this morning, Pilate is questioning Jesus, and asks him if he is a King
- Jesus responds that his Kingdom is not of this world because he has no followers fighting for him
- Indeed, that is not the kind of Kingdom Jesus would have wanted anyway, or would create
- Jesus' kingdom was not from this world, where violence, fear and oppression determine how things go

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper29b>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_the_King

- This was a Kingdom different than anything created by humankind
- Certainly different than the Roman Empire, composed of lands and slaves attained through their military endeavors
- And the Roman Peace upheld by fear and the threat of that military returning to set things back in order
- The reality of living in this kingdom, or empire, certainly was not reflected in those Disney movies I watched as a kid
- At least not for the greater part of the population
- For the early Christians, most were not just in the bottom 99%, but the bottom 10%
- I wonder what it felt like to be an early Christian in this setting,
 - And to profess Christ as King, to be a member of the Kingdom of God
 - Surely it was not an easy thing
 - It was most certainly a political statement.
 - Professing such a thing was seen by those in power as a dangerous threat, swearing allegiance to anyone other than Caesar
 - Rome demanded complete allegiance and was willing to coerce people to get it.
 - Pure nationalism entangled with state-mandated religion
 - We all know of those early Christians were hunted and martyred because they were members of this other kingdom
 - For them, it was a bold and brave statement of critique of the kingdom around them
 - Showing that how things currently were was not how things should be
 - And it was a huge statement of hope- that being a part of God's Kingdom meant that there was always something more to come
 - That God was never finished working⁴
 - That God's kingdom will be something desperately hoped for
 - And that turns the world upside down
 - This will also be a kingdom that also mirrors the values and beliefs of its ruler- and this time the direction is set by Jesus himself
 - This will be a Kingdom where the meek inherit the earth, rather than it taken away by the strong
 - Where the sorrowful find joy
 - Where peacekeepers are acclaimed more than warriors

⁴ Jane E. Fahey, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 326

- A place where strangers stop on the road to help out someone who is hurt, even when it meant being vulnerable themselves to an ambush
- A kingdom inclusive of Jew and Samaritan, Gentile and Greek, slave and free, even when cultures and religions were different
- This kingdom is one of unity: where what we have in common outweighs what we have in difference
- A place where compassion, generosity, and love overpower fear
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- When put like this it sounds so ambitious, doesn't it? Almost like a fairy tale, but this is our good news
- But this is our promise, our hope, that with God it is not only possible, but will indeed become a reality.
- Creation will be made new
- In the end, good wins, and love conquerors all
- As these persecuted Christians embraced this hope, I know they were looking forward to a time when things would be different
- We read it in the book of Revelation this morning, pointing to a time when Christ will reign in a new earth
- Frankly, this is the only purpose that Revelation serves for me
- It tell us one very important thing- that in the end, God comes through on God's promises
 - Our hope is not in vain.
 - Everything else in that book is gratuitous, in my opinion
 - What started with God in the beginning of creation, will end with God.
 - Alpha and Omega
- But there's a lot more going on here than just a hope in the distant sweet by and by
- Jesus speaks of his kingdom not only as something in the future, but also as something that is already there
- And throughout the gospels, the Kingdom of God comes near, right now, present tense
- God's kingdom is breaking into this world one believer at a time, overlapping and overtaking the other kingdoms and governments we see
- This divine kingdom changes hearts and minds, calling us to compassion and justice in the face of risk
- The Kingdom of God where Christ reigns as King can be found within each of us

- Today's feast is a celebration and declaration of not only what will be one day, but what is already true
- While you and I don't live in a kingdom or an empire like these early Christians, and definitely have it much easier than they did
 - Somethings are still true: when we profess belonging and being faithful to a kingdom that is not of this world
 - The kingdoms of this world get uneasy.
- Even with all of our protections in this country, the freedoms guaranteed in our Bill of Rights
- Professing this faith that Christ is King is still a little risky, pushing the boundary
- It is still very much a critique of how things around us fall far short of the Kingdom Jesus would rule
- Even today, being a part of God's kingdom by definition acknowledges that our earthly empires are separate and distinct from God's
- We then hold up God's kingdom as the standard, the ideal
 - And for Christians I think we are to start identifying ways in which our earthly empires need improvement
- In our polarized and political atmosphere today, just saying that is enough to be accused of being unpatriotic!
- Being a member of God's kingdom automatically pushes back on unchecked nationalism
- Because it professes that the earthly empires, kingdoms, and nations do not get to form our identity- they do not get to claim us
 - Because we are already claimed by God
 - And that is still risky business- the work of peace is risky
- And yet God calls us forth as members of this new Kingdom that is right around the corner, soon to be and yet already here
- It calls us to be different kind people in the midst of the cultural and political wars that wage around us
- To preach and to enact a Kingdom where love reigns, justice and equality prevail, and it happens without violence or scapegoating or shaming
- And to do it and be it by example
- And over and over God calls us to Be Not Afraid, to not let our own fear of what might happen stop us from being the people we are reborn to be
- To enter a new way of living, of belonging, of loving- a new kingdom

- One that spills out into the world through our love, and non-violent actions towards justice and reconciliation
- It is already growing right here in our hearts, and in this room
- A kingdom where Christ is King.

Amen.